

small-town suburban murder and how (not) to avoid it by caughtontape

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Summary:

Mysterious anonymous phone calls. A hidden history of brutal local killings. A body in the lake on Birch Street.

Nancy, Steve, and Robin have seen stranger things. With Hopper M.I.A, the local police department is stumped, and it definitely doesn't help that Nancy and Robin have started receiving bizarre phone calls from an un-trackable number. Determined as ever to uncover the truth, the trio takes matters into their own hands. They've faced portals to monstrous alternate dimensions, hordes of vicious lizard-dogs, and a hive-minded flesh monster. What's a little small-town murder?

small-town suburban murder and how (not) to avoid it

Author's Note:

New chapters will be posted every Saturday.

Here's a soundtrack to optimize your reading experience (if you dare): "murder in the suburbs, 1985" on Spotify.

NANCY

When she gets the call, the sky outside is the color of a bruise.

It's been storming all day, but after dinner-- ordered-in pizza she and Mike opted for when their parents left for a homeowner's meeting-- the press of rain stills and the thunder quiets, and she says goodnight to Mike and ruffles his hair and trudges upstairs to shower. The days are passing slower, now that they're in the late, sticky stretch of summer that feels like a lifetime, and all she wants to do is scrub the apathy off her skin. She's done nothing the past couple of days except drive Mike to the Byers', finally return her summer reading books to the library, and stare at her ceiling every time she tries to work a nap into her schedule. And by schedule, she means nothing.

Nancy seriously needs to make more friends. And sure, she could call Jonathan, but the distance between them feels like a death sentence and he's been hanging up earlier than usual lately and she just really, really wants to talk to someone she can look in the eye in real fucking time. Sue her.

So she's in her bathroom, turning the tap to scalding hot, when her phone rings shrilly from her bedroom; she pivots on her heel and grabs it off her bedside table, curiosity piqued. A call this late at night is out-of-the-ordinary for telemarketers.

"Hello?"

There's a static-y pause, and Nancy feels her pulse quicken. She

doesn't get phone calls; she's not Mike, doesn't have a sprawling army of friends that call relentlessly at all hours of the day. And even if she did, she'd know the caller's number.

She can hear whoever's on the other end of the line breathing. Panting, like they've just run a mile. Nancy doesn't know if they're male or female, and she doesn't know if she wants to. Something about this feels... wrong. Dread coils heavily in her gut, and she swallows thickly, clears her throat.

"Is anyone there?"

The phone crackles, and Nancy jerks it away from her head, startled, her heart jumping in her chest like a caged bird.

A beat of silence. Nancy can hear the water running in her bathroom, focuses on the familiarity of it as her pulse returns to normal. There's nothing but static on the other end of the line, so she sets the phone down and pushes the last dredges of panic to the back of her mind. Nancy's gotten good at compartmentalizing-- shoving all the trauma of the last three years in a box and tucking it safely away somewhere deep inside her head-- but sometimes traces of her scared, sixteen-year-old self still manage to jump out.

It was a prank call, she tells herself, shaking her head at the way she'd jumped a minute ago. In the steamy embrace of her shower, she washes away the fear, scrubs hard at her skin like she's shedding it. She'll ask Mike if he's gotten any weird calls tomorrow, see if it's a pattern. It's probably just the neighborhood kids messing with her; the Morris family down the street, their two middle-school boys. She was being ridiculous.

After Nancy changes into her pajamas and tries not to stare too long at her reflection, she sits on her bed with her curtains shut and stares at her wallpaper. It's a pathetic nightly ritual that makes her think of Barb; the endless days they spent using it as a backdrop for fashion-show photoshoots, wearing Nancy's mom's makeup they snuck up the stairs and clothes they bought at the thrift store downtown. It fills her mouth with a sour taste, looking at it now, and she feels the urge to rip it off her walls flare up in her chest.

It's how she knows she needs to try to go to sleep.

Nights haven't gotten any easier since July fourth-- now, there's even more nightmare fuel swirling around in her brain, and she pulls her quilted bedspread up to her chin, making sure her legs aren't hanging off the side of her bed. It makes her feel a little like a child, only now she's almost nineteen and doesn't have a nightlight or a security blanket or a mother that's home to hear her scream. Mike's across the hall, but he can only sleep if his obnoxious white noise machine is on-- Nancy knows it has something to do with HIS trauma, that he hates the quiet. He told her once, when they'd ventured down into the kitchen at the same time one night, that it took him back to standing in a circle with his little friends, waiting for the next monster to come barreling out of the dark. He said that's how he always knew when to fall back; when it got too quiet.

So Mike's room is full of the sounds of the Amazon rainforest, and Nancy's door is shut against the sound, and she's alone.

She stares at the ceiling, at the spot where it leaked last Friday, at the poster she'd taped up of Judd Nelson a year ago. Sleep laps at the recesses of her brain, and she closes her eyes against the grainy darkness, surrendering to the pull.

The nightmares sink their teeth in in sickening flashes: Barb, coming back to haunt her with vacant eyes and slugs burrowing out of her skin; Mike, replacing Bob Newby's body on the hospital floor, being eaten alive by those sick lizard-dogs; Jonathan, letting go of Nancy's hands when she's trying to escape the portal in the woods, leaving her to freeze there, get ripped open by the Demogorgon. It always comes back to this, being trapped there that night. She would've paid for Barb's death that way. It would've been a penance, she figures. It wouldn't make Barb's death fair, but it would even things out. She wouldn't feel the guilt pool heavily in her gut at the sight of every swimming pool she sees. Or the anger, late at night, at the damn portal, at the monsters, at herself most of all.

When she finally wakes, gasping, from the horrific cocktail of terror her brain's cooked up tonight, Nancy decides she needs to start getting out more.

Getting out more, pathetically, looks like this: Nancy standing awkwardly in the entryway of Family Video the next afternoon with a list of movies to rent for Mike and a strange urge to organize the entire store. It's not that it's a mess, exactly, it's just... convoluted. The horror section and the rom-coms are right next to each other, the sci-fis blend with old black-and-white films from the fifties... it's a labyrinth.

She's picking her way carefully around a stack of unshelved 'Back to the Future' tapes when a familiar laugh echoes across the store. Nancy steps out of one of the aisles and comes face to face with Steve, a sandy-haired girl dragging him to the check-out counter. He's smiling, and when he sees her, he beams even wider.

"Nancy! What are you doing here?"

Nancy forces herself to smile back-- it's been forever since she's had to actually interact with anyone outside of her family, and she feels her throat dry up all of a sudden.

"Steve," she says brightly, or tries to. "I'm picking up some movies for Mike and his friends--" here, she waves her list half-heartedly in the air, "--and one for... myself, I guess."

"Oh, great--Dustin was bugging me about our new releases the other day, that must be what Mike's looking for," Steve says, all easy smiles and effortless charisma. He turns to the bright-eyed girl beside him, jerks his head in Nancy's direction. "Robin knows where everything is. Kieth has me on sticker-removal duty, the asshole, so she's our designated shelper."

The girl-- Robin-- steps forward, smiling nervously, and... oh, Nancy knows her. The memory creeps up on her out of nowhere: Steve and Robin in sailor suits underneath the garish neon lights of Starcourt, Nancy asking, "Who are you?" with a bite to her voice. God, why had

she been such a bitch? Now, staring at Robin under the fluorescent lights of Family Video, Nancy kind of wants to disappear.

Instead, she thrusts out her hand for Robin to shake, grinning back at her. "Robin, hi! I... remember you. From... well. Y'know."

Robin laughs a little, nodding. "No explanation needed, Wheeler. Here, lemme see that list of yours. I know the store like the back of my hand. Oh, man, 'Gremlins' is good-- follow me."

Steve waves, and Nancy smiles and lets Robin pull her back down the aisles, meandering past dramas and thrillers and period pieces until they reach what Nancy guesses is their sci-fi section. Robin reaches for Nancy's list again, and their hands brush. It sends a thrill through Nancy, and she smiles at Robin to mask the blush on her cheeks.

She misses having friends. Having girl friends, really-- Jonathan's great, but he just... doesn't understand her sometimes. Doesn't understand how hard it can be to be a girl in Hawkins, where your employers look at you as a coffee-delivery service instead of a real person with dreams and ambitions. Maybe, she thinks, Robin can be her friend: she's pretty, prettier than Nancy initially registered in the chaos of July fourth a month ago-- and more importantly, she seems witty in the same way Jonathan is, all snappy one-liners and dry, sarcastic comebacks to Steve's jabs. He's antagonizing her from across the store, yelling for her to hurry up so he can give her more copies of 'The Breakfast Club' to shelve.

She ignores him in favor of handing Nancy a stack of all the movies Mike had requested, 'Gremlins' glaring up at her from the top of the pile. Nancy smiles gratefully.

Robin's leading her back to the counter at the front when she stops in her tracks.

"Wait," she says, holding up a finger at Nancy. "You said you wanted to rent one for yourself, right? I've got, like, the perfect movie. Hang on."

And then she's racing along the aisles again, vanishing into the overcrowded drama section. Nancy finds herself smiling; she should

be more worried that it's such a foreign feeling, but she can't find it in herself to care.

"Here," Robin says, re-emerging from the endless maze of shelves. She's holding out a copy of 'Sixteen Candles,' eyes bright under the garish lights. Nancy smiles wider, takes it gingerly from Robin's hand.

"Thanks," she says, turning it over to read the plot summary on the back. "I've actually never seen this one."

"Really? It's kind of mainstream, but... I think you'll like it. Molly Ringwald is a great actress," Robin rambles, looping her thumbs through her belt loops. It's a weird move, something Nancy would expect a guy to do, but somehow it doesn't look awkward or stilted when Robin does it. "Y'know, if you're ever looking for a more... underground film, I have, like, a whole collection at my place. Steve and I do movie nights every Sunday."

Robin smiles at her, and it takes Nancy a couple of seconds to realize that it's an invitation. She brightens, grins back. "That sounds really fun, actually. I'll have to take you up on that offer."

Robin jerks her head towards the check-out counter, like, 'follow me,' and Nancy grins when Steve's eyes widen at the amount of movies she's renting.

"Jesus, Dustin really wasn't kidding about that all-nighter."

Nancy laughs, nodding. "Yeah, things can get... pretty hectic at the Wheeler house at the end of summer. It's nice, though, y'know? I'm glad they're all still hanging out, even though they're missing El and Will."

Steve scans tape after tape, nodding. "As much as they get on my nerves sometimes, always asking for rides and shit, they're loyal as hell. I don't think they're gonna grow apart anytime soon."

Nancy swallows thickly. She can't say the same for herself and Jonathan.

She's still watching Steve ring up her rentals when the phone by the

cash register rings; Robin picks it up so Steve can hand Nancy her change. They make a good team, Nancy thinks.

“Hello?” Robin asks after a beat of silence. She sounds slightly annoyed, eyebrows all furrowed, and Nancy stifles a giggle.

“Listen,” Robin’s saying, “If this is a prank call, it isn’t--”

There’s a long pause, and Robin’s face pales to the color of bone. Steve watches her, concern flitting across his face, and then there’s a sharp burst of sound erupting from the phone, and Robin’s yelling, “Shit!”

She jerks violently away from the phone, and Steve jumps about a foot in the air. Robin’s breathing hard, slamming the phone back down as he grabs her by the shoulders, spinning her around to face him.

“Rob, what the hell was that?”

She sucks in a breath, eyes wild, and Nancy feels something in her chest tighten. She’s getting the freakiest case of déjà vu, and if Robin says what Nancy thinks she’s going to say--

“It... it was just breathing, and then-- this man started talking, saying these horrible things-- and it burned me. The phone. There was this loud crackling sound, and--”

“Okay, okay,” Steve’s saying, pulling Robin in for a hug. She slumps against him, and Nancy feels her throat close up. Her mouth has gone dry, and when she tries to speak, nothing comes out. It sounds like the same call she got last night, only worse. Malicious. Not just some prank call... the way Robin’s shaking, she can guess pretty quickly the kinds of things that creep was saying. She barely knows Robin, but Nancy feels suddenly protective of her. She knows how it feels to be a girl in Hawkins, knows how it feels for men to feed on your fear.

“Robin, look at me,” Steve’s saying, voice strained. Nancy feels suddenly unwelcome, like she’s intruding on something-- she guesses they’re dating, from the way they look at each other. Shared trauma, her brain sing-songs in Murray’s voice.

“What was he saying? What’d he say to you?”

Robin just shakes her head, wiping viciously at her eyes, and Nancy finally finds her voice.

“I... got the same call. Last night.”

They both stare at her, like they’ve forgotten she’s there, and Steve says, “What?”

There’s a hard edge to his voice, and his jaw has tensed up; it takes Nancy a second to realize he isn’t mad at her, but whoever’s making these freaky calls.

“Well, not exactly the same,” Nancy says. “I heard the breathing, and the crackling sound, but... no one said anything to me. I guess I hung up before anyone could.”

Robin stares at her, wide-eyed. “So it’s a pattern now, right? Steve says you’re basically the Sherlock Holmes of Hawkins.”

Steve sighs like he’s embarrassed, and Robin huffs a quiet laugh, and some of the tension seems to drain out of the room. Nancy chews on her bottom lip pensively. “Well, not exactly... Usually they say two is a coincidence, three’s a pattern. It seems like whoever it is is gaining confidence, though.”

“Why d’you say that?” Steve asks, leaning forward over the counter on his elbows. He looks genuinely worried, and Nancy feels a tug of gratitude. Jonathan would just dismiss her if he was here, say she’s blowing things out of proportion, but Steve and Robin care. She can see it in their faces-- the same drive she has to find the truth behind the bizarre situations that seem to crop up all too often in their town.

Nancy sucks in a breath as she surveys the couple in front of her. They’ve all been through the ringer together, and even though they’re not exactly inseparable like Mike and his friends, it feels good to finally have people that will listen.

. “Because... the call I got was a couple of seconds long, tops. He

was... apprehensive. But, and this is just a theory-- he also heard the fear in my voice. Creeps like this feed on that. My guess is, he decided to strike again today, only this time he was more sure of himself. That's why he... said all that shit to Robin."

"Okay, but what did he say?" Steve asks, directing the question at Robin. She tears her eyes away from him, tensing up.

"Something I don't want to repeat."

"Rob--"

"It doesn't matter," Nancy cuts in, and they both snap their heads back to her. "What matters is catching him, and without Hopper here, we know Hawkins PD won't be able to do anything substantial. They spend their time playing cards and gorging themselves on Krispy Kreme. If we want to track this asshole down, we need to do it ourselves."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Steve says, holding both hands up. "I'm not letting either of you go after some-- perverted psychopath, okay? And... and how would we even find him? The number isn't trackable."

"He's probably using a burner phone," Robin tells him, her voice steadier now. She looks from Steve to Nancy like she's trying to assemble a puzzle in her head. Nancy knows the feeling.

"So, I repeat," Steve says, his gaze fixed on Nancy. "How would we even find him?"

She stares back at him, flicks her eyes towards Robin. "Simple. We wait for him to strike again."

On her drive home, Nancy finds herself scanning every car that passes her for old, creepy-looking men; unfortunately, this is

Hawkins, and they have a plethora of that sort of character in every house on every street in town. She knows it's pointless, but this tiny, nagging part of her, the part of her that can't turn off, or unwind, or let things go, is screaming to look for any possible leads. She almost runs two red lights in the time it takes to make it back to her neighborhood, but she gets home in one piece.

She's dropping the stack of tapes she rented for Mike on the kitchen table when he skids into the room, eyes wide.

"Nancy! Mom's been looking all over for you, holy shit," he says, breathing hard like he ran here. Nancy squints at him.

"I told you I was going to the video store--"

Mike's shaking his head, grabbing her by the arm and tugging her into the living room. "Well, you took a long-ass time to get back. Doesn't matter-- come in here."

Nancy jerks her arm back, following Mike begrudgingly. She's a little irritated at him-- something's going on, and he's being vague on purpose. Little shit.

"Mike, what the hell is--"

"Watch," he instructs, unpausing their TV with a flourish.

It's the local news, grainy and de-saturated; the news ticker at the bottom of the screen reads, "BREAKING: Body found dismembered in lake on Birch St. ; Hawkins PD refuses to comment." The news anchor, an airbrushed blonde with a shrill voice and a bold lip, stands feet away from the crime scene, yellow caution tape crisscrossing behind her.

Nancy feels her heart climb into her throat. She tries to focus on what the woman's saying, but her ears are ringing. Mike watches her intently, his arms crossed like he's the adult and she's the child.

"You should've at least told us you'd be gone for a while. Mom was freaking the hell out. They haven't... been able to identify the body yet, but it's a teenage girl."

“Fuck,” Nancy breathes. “Where’s Mom now?”

“In her room,” Mike says, reaching out a hand to stop her mid-stride. “And Nancy? She’s enforcing a curfew for us. It’s bullshit, but I thought you should hear it from me so you don’t get a lecture from her.”

“Thanks, bud.”

He nods, like they’re both in on something, and Nancy forces a smile before heading for her mother’s room. The door’s cracked; she knocks quietly before entering anyway.

“Oh, Nancy,” her mom says, folding her into a hug. “I was so worried! Where--?”

“Video store,” Nancy cuts her off, struggling to form a sentence in the crushing embrace. Her mom seems to understand, pulls back. “I was picking up some tapes for Mike. I figured he’d told you.”

“He did,” her mother says, voice strained, “but you were gone longer than we anticipated, and then... that awful news story. God, it’s like this town is cursed.”

Nancy huffs a little laugh, then claps a hand over her mouth. It’s not exactly a time for jokes, but if only her poor mom knew the half of it... Jesus Christ.

“Yeah,” she manages finally. “It’s just crazy. I... hope they catch whoever did it soon. Hopefully it’s just a drifter.”

Her mother sucks in a breath. “And speaking of, I’ve decided I want you and Mike home before dark from now on. When your father and I chose this neighborhood, we were certain it would be a safe place for you kids to grow up in, but...” she trails off, shaking her head morosely. “It just isn’t, anymore.”

Nancy’s already nodding. She’ll find a way to work around this, of course, because she always does. Her mother will never have to know; she’s never been as... involved as Nancy’s classmates’ parents, or as nervous as Ms. Byers. Nancy could slip soundlessly out her bedroom window if need be, and her mom would be none the wiser.

“Got it, Mom,” she says, forcing that naive sweetness into her voice that used to come so naturally. That Nancy-- all doe-eyes and sugary smiles-- died the moment Barbara did. All that’s left behind are hard lines and grimaces and the insatiable need to dig as deep as required to uncover the truth.

As she makes her way upstairs to the relative safety of her bedroom, Nancy goes over the turn of events in her head: phone call number one, as far as they know, was last night. Just breathing, no threats. Phone call number two, today, to Family Video. Breathing and... whatever the hell that creep said to Robin. Nancy shivers as she shuts her door. She still can’t figure out why the calls were so random, yet so obviously connected. They were almost identical in nature, but one was made to a personal phone and the other to a company one. It just doesn’t make sense to her. If the second call had been made to Robin’s phone at home, things would be clearer. More admissible.

She heads straight to her desk to jot down what she knows. First rule of investigative journalism: start with the known facts. She opens her moleskine, uncaps her pen, and gets to work.

First Call: Approx. 11:15 p.m. Friday, August 23rd to personal phone. Heavy breathing followed by a pause. Loud crackle of sound. Hung up after approx. 30 seconds.

Second Call: Approx. 5:30 p.m. Saturday, August 24th to Family Video company phone. Heavy breathing followed by explicit language (threats?). Loud crackle of sound. Hung up after approx. two minutes.

She pauses, unsatisfied, chewing pensively on the cap of her pen. Nancy wants to write what she knows about the body at the lake, but the sad reality is that she knows next to nothing. She could visit Hawkins Post to see if they have any information, but she doubts she’ll be welcome there after her antics earlier in the summer.

Nancy’s ruminating on this when her phone rings for the second time in the last two days. Super-charged with adrenaline, she jumps out of her seat and rushes for it, pressing the speaker to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Nancy,” Steve’s warm voice pours through, charged with urgency. She blows out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding, not entirely sure if she’s grateful that it’s just him.

“Steve, hey,” she replies, trying to push the panicked edge out of her voice. “What’s going on?”

“Uh, the news,” he says, in the same ‘duh’ tone Dustin uses on Mike. She rolls her eyes even though he can’t see it. “Have you watched it yet?”

“Yeah, I have,” she says. “D’you think--”

“The creepy-ass phone calls and the dead body in the lake are connected?” he finishes. “Uh, yeah. Who wouldn’t?”

Nancy laughs a little at that, wincing at the morbidity of their conversation. It feels like it’s been ages since she and Steve have talked about something... light. She kind of wishes they could, suddenly, and the thought makes something ache deep in her chest.

“So anyway,” Steve’s barreling on, “I was thinking, we should all meet up to talk about... whatever’s going on. You and me and Rob, I mean. She’s already at my place, actually, so--”

“Hey, Wheeler!” Robin’s voice spills through, and Nancy feels a smile creep onto her face despite herself.

“Rob, shut up, I’m trying to-- sorry about her,” Steve says. “Anyway, can you come over? Like, tonight? Actually, shit, I shouldn’t ask you to drive by yourself. We can come pick you up.”

Despite the nagging part of her that actually cares about obeying her mother’s rules, Nancy finds herself nodding. “Yeah, that works. Just-- park a little ways away from our front door. And come in through the window. Mom’s enforcing a curfew, but... what she doesn’t know won’t kill her. Can’t hurt her, I mean. Shit.”

“Got it! We’ll be there in twenty, tops,” Steve says, his voice brighter than it was earlier today despite the circumstances. Nancy suspects part of him likes the gruesome adventures they get sucked into every year-- Steve’s all frenetic energy, all movement, and he gets restless

easily. Whatever's going on, whether it's a serial killer straight from the pages of 'The Silence of the Lambs' or some sort of humanoid monster that's crawled into their world from the mouth of the Upside Down, he's intent on finding out. And that's something she's grateful for-- she doesn't know how she could pursue this on her own.

They exchange hasty goodbyes, and Nancy hangs up. She kills time shoving her moleskine, pens, and a bottle of water in a knapsack; hopefully they won't expect her to stay the night. It would be strange, anyway, since Robin and Steve are together. She'd be a third wheel.

When Nancy catches the gleam of Steve's headlights outside her window, she slings her bag over one shoulder and tugs her window open. She watches the passenger's side door of his car swing open, watches Robin bound across the grass to her side of the house. She's wearing a different shirt than she had been earlier today-- one of Steve's, Nancy notes, feeling a tiny phantom pang in her chest. It can't be real jealousy; she's long over Steve, has been since the end of sophomore year.

Robin's tapping at her window-- she's scaled Nancy's house much more smoothly than Steve had all those years ago-- and grinning, teeth glinting in the light of Nancy's bedroom lamp.

"Sorry!" Nancy says when she tugs her window open. Robin tumbles in, somehow gracefully, all long legs and shining eyes. "Sorry, I zoned out."

"It's all good, Nancy," Robin assures her. "Now come on-- Little Stevie's going to throw a temper-tantrum if we keep him waiting."

She grabs Nancy by the wrist, gentle but assertive at the same time, and Nancy feels a rush of excitement flare through her. Robin slides back out her bedroom window effortlessly, helping Nancy do the same. Together, they find footholds in the roof, shimmy down the drainpipe that juts out on one side of the house.

The air outside is cool despite the humidity earlier in the day-- maybe the rain finally blew a cold front in. They race across Nancy's yard, laughing into the wind, while Steve smiles at them from behind the wheel. Robin opens Nancy's door for her and throws herself back into

the passenger's seat, laughing breathlessly as Steve floors it down the street.

"What a rush!" Robin exclaims, letting her head fall back against her headrest as Nancy buckles her seatbelt with shaking hands.

"Jesus Christ, you almost fell, like three times," Steve scolds her, half-exasperated and half-fond. Robin grins at him, a flash of perfect white teeth, bright blue eyes. In the dimming light, she looks soft despite her cold exterior-- like a movie star from the sixties, all grainy, careless beauty. Nancy shakes her head at herself, willing her mind to re-focus.

"So, one thing I don't understand," she says to both of them, leaning forward in her seat and gripping the back of Robin's as Steve goes flying around a curve, "is why this guy called a company phone. If he's preying on young women, why not call multiple personal phones instead of chancing a call that the manager could pick up?"

Robin shakes her head. "That's what I was wondering, too... but then I thought, maybe he... knew that I'd answer. I take all the calls at Family Video, it's like, a designated job," she says, anxiety creeping into her voice. "It's scary as hell, but it's the only line of reasoning I can follow. He called us because he must've known I'd pick up."

Nancy shudders. She catches a vein jump in Steve's neck, sees his hands tighten on the wheel. "That's fucking disgusting," he says. "And... and terrifying. We-- if he's been watching you, Rob--"

"It's the only possible explanation," she says, her eyes fixed on some distant, invisible point on the horizon. They're almost to Steve's gated neighborhood; Nancy recognizes the trees, the one that lists unnaturally to one side like it's going to fall. The forest lining the narrow road thickens, darkening their drive. The sun's already gone down, but now the last rays of light in the sky are fading to a dark lavender, and Nancy feels a little thrill at the thought of being so far from home after dark; there's always been something stubborn in her that enjoys breaking the rules.

"Well, then we need to fucking tell someone," Steve snaps, punching in the gate code. "The police, or something--"

"They won't be able to do anything," Nancy pipes up from the back. "Excluding Hopper, look at all the help they've been the last three years."

Steve huffs an exasperated sigh, swinging into his driveway; his parents aren't home, Nancy notices with a twinge of sympathy. She knows it must be rough on him, being alone in this big, empty house all the time, but... he has Robin, she guesses. And Dustin, and her brother's weird little gaggle of friends. He's okay. But she knows it isn't easy, being alone at night. Hopefully he isn't all of the time.

"But that's different," he's saying, hopping out of the driver's side and leading the way to his front door. "That was... shit out of our control. An alternate damn dimension. This, though? This is a real fucking person, Nance. They could at least narrow down the suspect pool, if we... I don't know, if we told them about the calls. Maybe they'd be able to do something with that information, I don't know. Shit."

He unlocks the front door in a jerky movement, ushers them inside across the foyer, flicking on all the overhead lights one after the other as they head for the living room.

"I hate to say it," Robin says, "But I think Nancy's right. The most these schmucks deal with on a daily basis are cats stuck in trees and hesitant grocery store shoplifters. They're not equipped for this."

"Neither are we!" He exclaims, sinking down onto his couch. Robin plops down beside him, her gaze steady and grounding. Nancy perches on the edge of one of the overstuffed armchairs that take up two corners of the room.

"Then why'd you insist on all of us being here?" Robin asks, a hint of playfulness in her raspy voice. Steve huffs a sigh, levels with her stare.

"Fair enough. Listen, I know we're probably the only ones in this godforsaken town that can catch this guy. I just... the idea of him knowing you, Rob--"

"I know," she says, placing a comforting hand on his back. They share a weighted look, and Nancy suddenly becomes extremely

invested in a loose string on her blouse.

“Let’s just focus on what we know,” Robin says, addressing both of them now. Nancy looks up, fumbles with her bag.

“I made a list,” she says, flipping to the page she’s bookmarked in her journal and setting it on Steve’s coffee table. He and Robin lean in, eyes scanning the page.

“So we’re not working with much,” Steve deduces. Robin sighs, slumping back against the couch cushions.

“But I was thinking,” Nancy says, “if this guy isn’t a drifter-- if he lives in Hawkins, or has long enough to know that the girl always answers the phone at the video store, then that means he’s probably done his research on local killers in the past. Which means--”

“If we researched past serial killers, we might be able to chart out this guy’s course before he strikes again,” Robin finishes. Steve’s looking between the two of them like he’s stumbled upon Sherlock and Watson. Nancy feels a swell of pride when Robin smiles at her.

“Smart thinking, Wheeler. Steve, you have a computer, right?”

He’s already vaulting himself off the couch, making a beeline for the stairs to his room. Nancy and Robin fall in behind him, grinning matching got-cha grins; this isn’t a definite lead, but it’s a start. A jumping-off point. And when clues say jump, Nancy says how high.

As it turns out, Steve’s computer is kind of a piece of shit. They’re all crowded around it at his desk; Steve in his desk chair, Nancy perched on a stool she’s dragged over, Robin on her knees on the carpeted floor, gazing over both of their shoulders at news article after news article.

At Nancy’s request, they’ve pulled up the Hawkins Post archives from

the seventies, sixties, and fifties. It's an overwhelming amount of information, but Steve's punched in keywords to narrow down their search-- "serial killer," "murder," "foul play," "dismemberment," and, at Robin's last-ditch suggestion, "phone call". So far, their hunt has been fruitless; they stumbled across an article from 1974 detailing a single killing, but it was in self-defense in the chaos of a gas station robbery, and everything after that has been the same: self-defense, family homicides followed by suicides, accidental killings. No serial murderers, no dismembered bodies, and no creepy phone calls.

Robin's slumped against Steve like she's done, and Nancy can see that he's close to calling it a night, too; there are dark circles under his eyes that she didn't notice earlier. He keeps scrolling, though, and suddenly an article from 1965 catches Nancy's eye.

"Stop," she commands, and he takes his hand off the mouse, pausing to skim the headline as Nancy zeroes in on the article.

"A string of grisly killings have occurred over the span of the last two weeks," she reads out for Robin, who's closed her eyes and looks strangely peaceful in the glow of Steve's desk lamp. "And local police are quickly proving incapable of locating a perpetrator. Bodies have shown up all across town-- first, a decapitated female minor, found in the lake off of Birch Street-- holy shit, that's exactly where--"

"We know," Steve says. Robin's picked her head up and is staring intently at the computer screen. "And it's the same damn method, too. Keep reading, Nance."

Nancy swallows, feels a wave of nausea roll through her. "Then, in the dumpster behind Dahlia's Deli, another unidentified girl, in pieces. Shit, I can't--"

"It's okay," Robin says quietly, patting her shoulder, and it takes Nancy a second to realize she's talking about her inability to finish rattling off the gruesome deaths in the article rather than the situation they're in now. "Steve, can we print this out?"

He nods, transfixed. Nancy's finally peeled her eyes away from the screen, forcing the images of dismembered girls out of her mind. She forces herself to stare at the posters tacked up on Steve's walls: Cyndi

Lauper, Bon Jovi, AC/DC, Guns N' Roses. Phoebe Cates. Molly Ringwald. Ally Sheedy.

She's still zoned out when Steve nudges her, pointing at a line of text from an article that was released a week after the one they just read: 'Killer caught and sentenced to death.'

They make promises to meet up at the public library tomorrow morning, then print off copies of both articles, each detailing the ghastly murders. When they finally load back up in Steve's car and head for Nancy's neighborhood, all the earlier adrenaline has drained out of them. There's a tension surrounding them now, the understanding that whoever is behind what happened today is probably going to strike again, most likely in the next couple of days. It makes something dark and cold pool in Nancy's gut, curl around her windpipe. Outside, the whole town is inky-dark, murky through the tinted glass of Steve's windows, and it amplifies the fear that hangs heavy between all of them. The drive back to her house is eerily quiet, and Nancy shuts her eyes and leans her head against the coolness of her window.

When Steve pulls up to her side of the house again, still safely out of sight of Nancy's mom's bedroom or the living room, he insists on walking with her across the yard, but also refuses to leave Robin alone in the car, which means they all have to trudge across the still-damp grass to Nancy's window.

They say their goodbyes quickly, and Robin gives Nancy a boost to help her get up onto the roof; she tries to ignore the thrill that goes through her when she nearly falls and Robin catches her around the waist. Nancy isn't ready to dissect what that feeling means; she chalks it up to the wild, emotional last couple of hours, and waves at Steve and Robin when she's safely inside her room.

She watches them rush back across her yard, watches them hop into Steve's car, watches the glimmer of headlights disappear as they drive out of the neighborhood. She makes herself take three deep breaths, exhaling for eight counts each time like Jonathan taught her.

After Nancy shoves her knapsack in her closet, changes into her pajamas, and brushes her teeth, there's a hesitant knock on her

bedroom door. She's under the covers in her bed, poised to pull the cord on her bedside lamp, but she's gotten up three times in the past five minutes to make sure her window is securely locked.

"Come in," she calls, and her door creaks open to reveal Mike. He steps into her room quickly, like it's urgent, and Nancy slides out from under her covers and beckons him over. He sits gingerly on the edge of her bed, and she notices with a twinge of fear that there are scrubbed-at tear tracks on his face. Mike never cries.

"Mike? What's wrong, what happened?"

"You weren't here," he says, voice breaking. Nancy feels a rush of guilt, and she grabs him by the shoulders, forcing him to meet her eyes. He looks so small, suddenly, arms folded around himself in one of Will's oversized sweatshirts-- he's still just a kid, and Nancy forgets that far too often. She wants to kick herself.

"I'm so sorry-- hey, look at me. Mike." His gaze flicks up to meet hers, and Nancy tries to smile reassuringly. "I'm fine. I was at Steve's, he drove me there and even walked me back across the yard to my window. Mike, I'm okay."

"Why would you--?"

"He and Robin really wanted me to come over, and... look, I'm sorry. I know it was stupid, and I should've told you, but I couldn't risk-- shit, you didn't tell Mom, did you?"

He shakes his head no, eyes welling up, and Nancy heaves a sigh. She wants to hug him, but she doubts he'd let her.

"You're an idiot," he says, glowering, but his voice wobbles traitorously. Nancy huffs a watery laugh.

"I know. I know, and I promise I'll tell you if I ever go out late again, okay? I promise."

He looks at her intently, like he's searching for a trace of bullshit, and holds out his pinky with an air of finality. "Pinky swear."

Nancy grins; this is something they used to do when they were kids,

before Nancy got too cool to play D&D with her brother and his little friends. They'd break a vase or something playing rough in the house and pinky swear not to mention it to Mom, or he'd come home with a black eye from one of those grotesque school bullies and make her pinky swear to convince their dad he fell off the monkey bars, or she would make a C on a test in middle-school algebra and make him pinky swear not to tell their parents after he saw her shove the evidence down the garbage disposal.

Now, with years of trauma behind them and maybe more to come, they link pinkies again, sealing the promise.

Mike grins at her on his way out of her room, and Nancy feels a tiny pull in her chest. An ache. She wants to go back to those years where everything felt easy and uncomplicated and safe, back before portals to dark realities and missing person posters and corrupt government-run laboratories. Or at least before she knew about them.

Finally, when the sounds of Mike's white noise machine leak through the walls of the house and Nancy's almost got the image of the crime scene on the news out of her head, she reaches across her nightstand and flicks off her lamp, and her room is swallowed up in grainy darkness.

Bizarrely, there are no nightmares tonight. Nancy sleeps peacefully for the first time in months; she chalks it up to the quality time with her brother and her friends-- she guesses Robin is her friend now-- even if said time was unnerving and left her feeling homesick for her younger years. It's been so long since she's held a conversation with anyone other than her mom or Mike or Jonathan, and Nancy guesses the loneliness was weighing on her, amplifying all her negative emotions and manifesting in the form of night terrors.

Regardless of the reason why, she's grateful for the night of rest when she wakes early the next morning and gets ready to meet Steve and Robin at the public library. She grabs her bag with the moleskine and the articles they printed off yesterday, snags a breakfast bar from the pantry, and leaves a note for her mother on the kitchen table.

She's pulling into the library parking lot beside Steve's BMW, fumbling with her bag, when the news spills through her car radio: A

second body. Cut up into pieces, stuffed into the dumpster behind Dahlia's Diner.